

# CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: WHAT DO CATHOLICS KNOW, AND WHAT DO THEY BELIEVE?

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## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	7
Data and Methods .....	7
A. Development of CST Knowledge Index .....	7
B. Development of CST Support Index .....	7
Discussion .....	12
A. CST knowledge .....	12
B. CST support .....	13
C. Knowledge related to support .....	14
D. Other Factors affecting knowledge and support .....	16
1. Priests .....	16
2. Laypersons .....	19
Conclusion .....	23

## I. Introduction

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a distinct set of principles and ideas promulgated by a set of core magisterial documents of the Catholic Church over approximately the past century. In contrast to the Church’s teachings on sexual morality, which are well known to American Catholics but accepted by only a small minority of them, Catholics in America are often thought to hold views sympathetic to CST while being largely ignorant of the doctrines themselves. For this reason, CST is often characterized as the Catholic Church's "best kept secret”.<sup>1</sup>

For the same reason, many have called for more and better teaching regarding CST, and a number of efforts have been devoted to improving catechesis in this area. If only for strategic reasons, such an emphasis is entirely justifiable. Religious education focused where students are receptive is more likely to be productive. For many Catholics, CST knowledge

also serves as a basis for common efforts to improve American society. Moreover, Efforts to promote CST often also have what might be called a restorative subtext. To the extent that well-publicized teachings about moral stances they cannot accept weakens the legitimacy of the Church for liberal Catholics, the promulgation of Church teaching with which they are likely to be sympathetic may, it is thought, help restore or strengthen the Church's legitimacy. Whether or not this intention is well-founded, it is clear that for many the stakes regarding CST knowledge and acceptance are much higher than mere catechetical improvement.

As important as this discussion is, it has been impeded by a lack of definite knowledge regarding the extent to which Catholics actually do know and accept the doctrines of CST. As far as I know, there has been no systematic attempt to measure the knowledge and acceptance among Catholics of the doctrines comprising CST. This study attempts to amend this defect. Using official Church publications, I derived instruments to measure both knowledge and acceptance of CST. This process, involving an extensive exercise in instrumentation, is described in the "Data and Methods" section. I then administered these instruments to national random samples of Catholic priests and parishioners. The results for each of these groups are presented in the "Analysis" section. Finally, I discuss some of the implications of the findings under "Discussion and Conclusion".

## **II. Data and Methods**

Data for this study were derived from surveys administered to national random samples of Catholic priests and parishioners in the winter of 2000/2001. This was part of a general assessment of the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, an agency of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The surveys were developed and administered

by a research team at the Life Cycle Institute of the Catholic University of America.

The level of CCHD knowledge and participation was anticipated to be small among parishioners, so we chose to focus on the most active and involved parishioners to improve the meaningfulness of the results. We accomplished this by sending surveys to members of parish pastoral councils. This group of parishioners is among the most active in each parish. Because pastoral council members are usually elected, they are also representative of the parish in meaningful ways.

The number of parishioners per parish varies greatly by region in the United States, from a high of 8,087 parishioners per parish on average for Region XI (Pacific Region) to a low of 1289 parishioners per parish for Region IX (Central Plains). A random sample of parishioners will thus be biased toward larger parishes, and a random sample of parishes will be biased toward smaller ones. To counteract these potential biases, we used the known distribution of parishes to draw a balanced sample by regions. Using data from the 1998 Official Catholic Directory published in Catholicism USA<sup>2</sup>, and data from the 2000 Official Catholic Directory<sup>3</sup>, we drew a random sample of 750 Catholic parishes in the United States in the following manner. First, we assigned to each of the thirteen regions of the Church a number of sample parishes to draw that was equivalent to the actual proportion of U.S. parishes in that region. Second, we randomly selected one-third of the dioceses from each region. Third, from these dioceses we systematically sampled from each region the number of parishes obtained in step one. This procedure ensured that our sample represented as accurately as possible the true distribution both of parishioners and parishes, as far as could be specified by region.

On or around December 8, 2000, we mailed a packet containing a pastor's questionnaire and twelve parishioners' questionnaires to the 800 selected parishes. The packets were addressed to the parish pastor, as indicated by the 2000 Official Catholic Directory<sup>4</sup>. We asked each pastor to fill in the pastor's questionnaire and pass the parishioners' questionnaires on to the parish council for completion. Twenty-two of the packets were returned by the Postal Service as undeliverable. In late January 2001 we mailed a follow-up questionnaire and a reminder to pastors who had not responded to the initial mailing.

We received 267 questionnaires back from the priests and 845 from the parishioners, giving us response rates of 34% and 42% respectively (assuming that nonresponding priests also did not deliver their parishioner questionnaires). This rate of response is comparable to similar surveys in this population, and standard inspections revealed no apparent bias. We believe, however, that response may have been lowered because the surveys were mailed over the Christmas holiday season. The statistical margin of error due to sampling is plus-or-minus 5 for the priests and plus-or-minus 2.9 for the parishioners.

#### A. Development of CST Knowledge Index

In the interest of establishing benchmarks for assessing both knowledge and acceptance of CST, special care was devoted to operationalizing these concepts. As a body of explicit knowledge, CST forms part of the larger corpus of Catholic doctrine and stands over against alternative views of human society. The operational challenge, then, is to distinguish it from these crosscutting contexts. Fortunately, the core content of CST is uniquely identified with a fairly small set of magisterial documents and principles: the documents *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, and *Centesimus Annus*, and the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, the

rights of labor and the living wage. These few items form an irreducible minimum of cognitive content defining this body of thought. Though many would (rightly) want to add to this list, none would reduce it.

In order to identify and distinguish CST, respondents were invited to recognize some of the core CST items in the context of other “distracter” items. These items were derived from common American perceptions of society or from other areas of Catholic teaching. The respondents were presented with a set of 10 options and asked to indicate which ones they could recognize as being associated with CST. The items, with the percentage responses of the priests and parishioners, are presented in Table 1. The CST-associated items are shown in boldface.

**TABLE 1**  
**Items Recognized as Associated with CST, Comparing Pastors and Parishioners**  
(In percent)

Item (Official components of CST are in bold)	Pastors	Parishioners	Difference
A. The idea of racial equality	93	88	-5
B. The encyclical <i>Fides et Ratio</i> (“Faith and Reason”)	30	35	+5
<b>C. Support for labor unions</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>-55</b>
D. Opposition to the death penalty.	90	81	-9
<b>E. The encyclical <i>Centesimus Annus</i> (“The Hundredth Year”)</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>-33</b>
F. Support for communism	56	55	-1
<b>G. The idea of subsidiarity</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>-47</b>
H. "preferential option for the wealthy"	14	5	-9
<b>I. The U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter "Economic Justice for All".</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>-34</b>
J. The teaching that "social drinking" is not a sin.	8	18	+10

To validate the instrument, this set of questions makes use of the probability that priests are much better educated about CST than are laypersons. Items C, E, G and I in Table

1 were intended to be the correct responses, being uniquely associated with CST. They are presented in boldface for easy identification. The remaining distracter items represent either other facets of Catholic teaching (B, D), common cultural values that are not particularly associated with CST (A, F, J), or simply false ideas (H). The accuracy of these items, of course, can be contended on substantive grounds. However, their strength as an indicator of CST knowledge is relative, not absolute.

If priests have more explicit knowledge of CST than parishioners, then, to the extent that this instrument accurately measures explicit knowledge of CST, we would expect that on all of the genuine items, but none of the distractors, the priests would demonstrate much higher knowledge than the parishioners. As is readily seen, such a pattern is clearly evident in the responses. The rightmost column of Table 1 shows the difference between the priests and parishioners. Although some of the distractors, shown in regular print, attracted large majorities of both pastors and parishioners, it is readily observable that these items did not differentiate among the groups as did the items actually associated with CST. The priests and laypersons differ by only 10 points or less on all of the distractor items, and there is no pattern to the differences. The priests' percentages are higher than the laypersons for three distractors (A, D and H), lower for two (B and J) and effectively equal for one (F). By contrast, the *smallest* difference between the priests and laypersons on the genuine items is 33 points, with the priests showing higher percentage recognition in every case. This clear difference provides confidence that this instrument adequately captures the respondents' explicit knowledge of CST.

Accordingly, assigning a 1 for correct identification (otherwise 0) on each item, we

combined the responses on the four genuine items for each respondent into a “CST Knowledge Index”, with values ranging from 0 (no items correctly identified) to 4 (all four items correctly identified). An exploratory factor analysis on the four genuine items using standard defaults (principal components analysis using the Kaiser criterion, with number of factors not specified) confirmed this thinking by extracting exactly one factor, with loadings above .50 on each item. The inter-item reliability for these items, measured by Cronbach's Alpha at .44 for the laypersons and .50 for the priests, was low by psychometric standards. However, the purpose of this scale was not to measure settled traits but to distinguish relative awareness of a body of explicit knowledge. It should be borne in mind that this index does not give a very precise absolute indication of participants' knowledge of CST. An examination of individual items is provided below in the Discussion section.

## B Development of CST Support Index

Operationalizing support for or acceptance of CST independent of explicit knowledge presented a different set of challenges. Here it was crucial to avoid tying attitudes of support too closely to the participants' explicit knowledge of CST, thereby building in a bias in favor of knowledge. We therefore sought to assess the respondents' attitudes with regard to broad themes related to poverty and social justice that were in accord with CST. For this purpose we turned to an official statement of the themes of CST.

In 1999 the U.S. Catholic bishops published a brief overview of CST for teaching purposes called “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching”<sup>5</sup>. This document set forth 7 “key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition.” These themes are: Life and Dignity of the Human Person; Call to Family, Community and Participation; Rights and Responsibilities;

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable; The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers; Solidarity; and Care for God’s Creation. We devised questions operationalizing these 7 themes, focusing on the two—Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, and Rights and Responsibilities—that are most clearly pertinent to issues of poverty. Questions relating three themes—Life and Dignity of the Human Person, Care for God’s Creation—were dropped during review because of objections that they were not relevant to the larger study in which we were engaged. Questions relating to Solidarity were dropped as being too dependent on explicit knowledge. The four remaining themes were focused on issues relating to poverty. These themes and the associated questions are presented below.

### 1. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

A short description elaborated each theme. The description for this theme read: “A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition . . . instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.”

The relevant concepts of this description are a critique of growing economic inequality and the notion of putting the poor first. We sought to determine identification with these ideas most directly through two items:

**Circle the number for the response that best fits your present thinking.**

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral or Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Economic decisions that increase poverty are immoral.	5	4	3	2	1
Differences in income in America are too large.	5	4	3	2	1



The first of these was replicated from the Catholic Pluralism Project,<sup>6</sup> the second from the National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey (GSS),<sup>7</sup> providing comparisons of responses with those of all Catholics and with the U.S. population.

## 2. Rights and Responsibilities

This theme’s description reads in part, “Every person has a . . .right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.”

To get at the concept of social responsibility or obligation to those in poverty, we asked the following question:

**Circle the number that best represents your opinion.**

If someone is in poverty it is his or her own responsibility.      1   2   3   4   5   6   7      If someone is in poverty it is society’s responsibility

We also included the following item as related to the spectrum of personal to social responsibility for poverty. This replicated an item from the GSS.

**Circle the number for the response that best fits your present thinking.**

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral or Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
One reason why there are people in poverty in this country is the lack of effort by those in poverty themselves.	5	4	3	2	1

## 3. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The description of this theme read in part: “Work is more than a way to make a living. . . .If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected: the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions. . . .

This concept has been elaborated in a long history of the idea of the living wage. To determine attitudes consistent with this idea we asked:

Circle the number for the response that best fits your present thinking.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral or Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Personal income should not be determined solely by one's work. Rather, everybody should get what he/she needs to provide a decent life	5	4	3	2	1

### 3. Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The description for this theme reads in part, “We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.” For this concept we posed the following semantic differentials:

Circle the number that best represents your opinion:

A wealthy person should feel obligated to help those in poverty.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	A wealthy person is free to help or not help those in poverty as he/she chooses.
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Although they are based on a summary from an official source, some important and relevant elements of CST may not be covered by the themes outlined above. The questions we devised, moreover, can only at best approximate the richness and diversity of opinions compliant with or influenced by this body of thought. It is also clear that some of the themes, and therefore the associated questions, overlap. Nonetheless, we expected that together these questions would reflect opinion about CST accurately enough to meaningfully assess and compare knowledge and/or acceptance of its major themes.

Pretest results revealed that the item, "One reason why there are people in poverty in this country is the lack of effort by those in poverty themselves", which was part of a larger series of items beginning with "One reason why. . . ", was not useful for scaling apart from the other items in the series. Since we did not have space for the entire series, this item was dropped from inclusion in an index.

TABLE 2

CST SUPPORT INDEX ITEMS,  
COMPARING PASTORS AND PARISHIONERS (IN PERCENTS)

How much do you agree with the following statements?	Percent responding "Agree" or "Strongly Agree"		
	Pastors	Parishioners	U.S. Population
Economic decisions that increase poverty are immoral.	88	70 (74 CPP)	--
Differences in income in America are too large.	82	67	67*
A wealthy person should feel obligated to help those in poverty.	80	51	--
Personal income should not be determined solely by one's work. Rather, everybody should get what he/she needs to provide a decent life to his/her family.	59	43	34 **
If someone is in poverty it is society's responsibility.	63	43	--

\*Source: GSS 1996    \*\* Source: GSS 1987.

The remaining five items were combined to form a "CST Support Index". This could just as accurately be considered an index of views on poverty, since all the items deal with some aspect of economic justice. This focus, however, reflects an emphasis on poverty in the bishops' teaching itself, which means that views on poverty are themselves good indicators of views or support regarding CST. Thus we retained the name "CST Support Index", while recognizing that elements of CST not related to poverty are not represented directly.

Comparative responses for each item are presented below in Table 2. A response indicating any level of agreement with CST on each item was scored as "1" and these scores were aggregated to form a scale ranging from 0 (No support) to 5 (Full support). As with the knowledge index, inter-item reliability was low (Alpha was .50 in the lay sample and .58 among the priests), but factor analysis confirmed the unidimensionality of the scale items. Since the items were designed to measure separate themes, it is not surprising that their common variance is subject to an unusually large amount of "noise". This scale, as with the

knowledge index, is adequate for relative comparisons, but too much weight should not be placed on it as a measure of absolute support for CST. For this purpose, we provide an analysis of individual items in the next section.

### **III: Discussion**

#### **A. CST Knowledge**

As already mentioned, all four of the CST-associated items on the knowledge index (shown in Table 1), but none of the six distracters, had much higher percentage response from pastors than from parishioners. While over 80% of the priests recognized that support for labor unions was associated with CST, less than a third of the parishioners did so. While a large majority of the pastors also correctly identified the bishops' pastoral "Economic Justice for All", less than two-thirds recognized the idea of subsidiarity, and only a bare majority correctly identified the encyclical "Centesimus Annus". However, only a fifth of the laypersons recognized that either of these latter two items was associated with CST. Two observations summarize these findings: 1) CST knowledge is moderately low in some areas among pastors, and 2) CST knowledge is extremely low in all areas among laypersons.

#### **B. CST Support**

The priests also showed stronger support for CST than the laypersons, but the difference was not as great as with CST knowledge. Table 2 compares the priests' and parishioners' responses on CST support. Items in the table are presented in descending order of percent agreement. The pastors demonstrated strong identification with all of the CST principles; a majority of them were in conformity with every item in the table. Parishioner support was generally lower, although a majority of parishioners agreed with three of the five items. More than two-thirds of both groups agreed with the statement "Economic decisions

that increase poverty are immoral". The notation "74 CPP", located in the first row of the column labeled "Parishioners", indicates that 74% of the respondents to a 1995 survey administered by the Catholic Pluralism Project,<sup>8</sup> also agreed with this statement. That survey, performed by a professional polling company, was based on a random telephone survey of U.S. Catholics 18 years of age and older. The similarity of their findings with ours confirms the general accuracy of our parishioner results. More than two-thirds of both priests and parishioners also agreed that differences in income in America are too large.

Both clerical and lay Catholics, then, demonstrate strong support for the general idea of the option for the poor and vulnerable. This does not necessarily represent the influence of CST, however. As the rightmost column of Table 2 indicates, the percentage of parishioners agreeing that income inequality in America is too large was no different than that of Americans in general on this question. Regardless of the influence of CST or the Church, then, there appears to be a general agreement among Americans that inequality should be reduced.

On the other hand, the parishioners supported the idea of the living wage somewhat more strongly than did Americans in general, although still less strongly than did the priests. Less than half (43%) of the parishioners agreed that everybody should get what he/she needs to provide a decent life to his/her family, but only a third (34%) of Americans in general agreed with this statement. Agreement with the idea that poverty is society's responsibility, not just the responsibility of the poor, showed the same pattern. Thus, while Catholic parishioners are no more (or less) concerned about poverty than non-Catholic Americans, they

are more likely, in accord with CST, to see it as a problem of community rather than individual failing.

The individual item responses indicate that parishioners' support for CST is somewhat higher than their level of knowledge. While the percentage of the laypersons who correctly identified the CST knowledge items ranged from 33% to 55%, the percentage indicating agreement with the support items ranged from 43% to 70%. By contrast, the range of the priests' responses on the knowledge items--50% to 91%--is much more similar to that of the support items, i.e., from 59% to 88%. Laypersons, then, may not know exactly what the Church's social teaching is, but they are predisposed to be in favor of it. An examination of the inter-item scale responses shows these results more clearly.

### C. Knowledge related to Support

Comparisons of scores on the CST Knowledge Index confirms that priests generally have a much greater knowledge of CST than laypersons. Figure 1 portrays the proportion of correct responses for these two groups on the knowledge index items. Two-thirds of priests correctly identified at least three of the four index items; one-third recognized all four. By contrast, two-thirds of laypersons failed to identify more than one of the items, and one-third recognized none. The mean score for the priests (2.9) was nearly three times that of the laypersons (1.1).

Figure 1 About Here

This very wide disparity in knowledge provides direct evidence that effective catechesis in CST has been impaired or lacking. If both priests and laypersons demonstrated little knowledge of CST, we might deplore the general lack of understanding in the Church of this

area of doctrine. But when laypersons show little knowledge while priests show much more knowledge, it appears that the priests' knowledge is not being effectively communicated to or received by their parishioners.

Despite the disparity in knowledge, an examination of the support scale confirms that there is only a relatively small difference between priests and laypersons in their support for or acceptance of the teachings of CST. Figure 2 shows the comparative distributions for these groups on the CST Support Index. Priests scored higher on average, at 3.2, than laypersons, at 2.2. Despite the fact that the support scale is slightly larger, the difference between the means (1.0) is only slightly more than half that for CST knowledge (1.8). Support responses on over half the index items were given by 70% of the priests and 41% of the laypersons.

Figure 2 About Here

The scaled items confirm what the individual items suggested, that American Catholics are generally in agreement with the sense of the Church's social teachings, even though they do not know the doctrines explicitly. This statement is probably more accurate for laypersons than for priests, since the difference between knowledge and support is generally greater for them. This perception, however, is simply negative: that support is not related to knowledge. In order to better understand the beliefs of American Catholics we pursued the related positive question: "If support for CST is not related to knowledge, then to what is it related?" In examining this question we found a number of factors that were related to support and/or knowledge.

Figure 3 About Here

## D. Other factors affecting knowledge and support

### 1. Priests

Younger priests showed better knowledge but lower support for CST than older ones. There was no corresponding age correlation among laypersons.<sup>6</sup> Figure 3 illustrates these trends. The average score on the CST Knowledge Index among the youngest priests (in their 30s) was 3.5, while among the oldest priests (aged 70 and over) it was only 2.4. The data provided mixed indications regarding how to interpret this finding. Since CST has developed significantly in the last couple of decades--with *Solicitud Rei Socialis*, *Centesimus Annus*, and the pastoral *Economic Justice for All*--this finding may reflect the fact that older priests have been harder pressed to "keep up". For example, as Figure 4 shows, nearly three-fourths (73%) of priests in their thirties recognized *Centesimus Annus* among the index items; only a third (33%) of priests in their seventies did so. Most (84%) of the older priests (in their seventies) did recognize the Bishops' Pastoral "Economic Justice for All", but all of the younger (in their thirties) priests did. On the other hand, there is also some indication that CST education in priestly formation may have improved in more recent times. Less than half (47%) of the older priests recognized the idea of subsidiarity, which had entered Church teaching several decades before they were ordained, while almost all (91%) of the younger priests did recognize this principle.

Figure 4 About Here

Figure 5 About Here

In contrast to CST knowledge, CST support declined somewhat among younger priests. Paradoxically, the youngest priests, who had the highest knowledge, had lower



support for CST than did older priests, who had less knowledge. The differences in support are not as large as for CST knowledge, although they are statistically significant. The youngest group of priests scored an average of 2.8 on the CST Support Index; while the oldest group scored an average of 3.2. Figure 5 illustrates the difference on two of the items comprising the index. Only a quarter of priests in their thirties strongly agreed with the statements, “Differences in income in America are too large” and “Economic decisions that increase poverty are immoral.” By contrast, over half of the priests in their seventies strongly agreed with these statements.

For priests, knowledge about CST has no apparent effect on their support for it. There is no measurable correlation of knowledge with support, either overall or within categories of age. By contrast, when knowledge is controlled, age has a significant positive correlation (.14) with the support and with every item comprising the CST Support Index. Thus, priests of the same age who differ in their knowledge of CST show the same amount of support for it, while priests of different ages with the same level of CST knowledge show differing levels of support. A priest’s age, then, is a far better predictor of support for CST than knowledge of CST.

#### Figure 6 About Here

These findings, of course, call for explanation. Why should the youngest priests, with the greatest knowledge of CST, also be the least supportive of it? It is hard to answer this question from the data we gathered, although we can eliminate some possible answers as unlikely. First, the lack of correlation between knowledge and support prevents us from speculating that an increase in CST knowledge somehow reduces support among the younger

priests. Age, or something related to age, induces both lower knowledge and higher support, but lower knowledge does not directly induce higher support. As we saw above, moreover, CST knowledge for almost all priests is very high. Second, the relationship of knowledge to support does not appear to turn on any large pivotal events, such as a Church council or political changes, in the past generation. As Figure 6 demonstrates, the excess of support over knowledge increases in a linear fashion as older groups of priests are examined. This figure shows the average difference between the knowledge score and the support score for successive 10-year age groups of priests. The priests in their 30s, for example, scored about 1.5 points lower, on average, on support than they did on knowledge. This "support deficit" decreases monotonically among successively older age groups, until in the oldest age group there is a "support bonus" in which the support score exceeds the knowledge score by about 1.5 points. The regularity of this progression suggests that the changes in knowledge and opinion are related to gradually developing life-course or period trends, not cohort events, e.g., Vatican II.

## 2. Laypersons

Unlike priests, laypersons exhibited no discernible age trend for either knowledge or support for CST. Rather, differences in knowledge or support among laypersons were strongly associated with differences in parish involvement and religiosity. Table 3 shows these effects. As the first two rows in the table show, parishioners who are more recent members and who are more active in volunteering in the parish express somewhat greater knowledge and support of CST than members with more tenure or who volunteer less. Newer members, all of whom joined the parish as adults, may be more likely to have participated in the Rite of Christian

TABLE 3

## FACTORS AFFECTING LAYPERSONS' KNOWLEDGE AND SUPPORT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

	Mean score on	
	CST Knowledge Index	CST Support Index
How many years have you been a member of your parish?		
6 or fewer	1.50	2.29
7 or more	1.06	2.17
How many hours a week do you volunteer in your parish?		
1-3	1.01	2.08
4-6	1.32	2.31
7 or more	1.52	2.70
How many families are in your parish?		
500 or fewer	1.02	2.12
501-1000	1.14	2.17
1001-1500	1.28	2.25
1501-2000	1.35	2.38
2001-5000	1.47	2.50
How often do you attend Mass?		
Weekly or less	1.03	2.08
More than weekly but less than daily	1.15	2.27
Daily	1.71	2.43
Education		
High school or less	.94	1.97
College degree or more	1.27	2.36

Initiation for Adults, which provides basic teaching about CST. Larger parishes may be more likely to have an active social concerns or social justice committee. Those parishioners

who attended Mass or volunteered in the parish more frequently also tended to score higher on both knowledge and support for CST. Volunteering had the strongest effect of any of the variables on both knowledge and support. Those who volunteered in the parish 11 or more hours per week scored a third (34%) higher on support and over half (55%) higher on knowledge than those who volunteered less than 5 hours per week. Mass attendance had a similarly strong effect on knowledge, but only a weak effect on support for CST. The direction of causality, of course, might run the other way: those with greater knowledge of and support for CST may choose to volunteer in the parish more frequently.

CST knowledge and support was also higher among laypersons with more education. College graduates averaged a third of a point higher on the knowledge index and half a point higher on the support index than those who had not attained a college degree. Surprisingly, differences in income, which were strongly correlated with education ( $R=.34$ ), had no effect on CST attitudes. About a tenth of the laypersons reported active involvement by themselves and others in the parish in a group that helps "organize and empower persons in poverty to improve their lives by working together". These scored .2 higher on the CST support index, on average, but no higher on the CST Knowledge Index.

Two points regarding the parishioners' knowledge and belief structure, relative to that of the priests, are worthy of note. First, the findings presented in Table 3 underscore the point made earlier that the collective knowledge of laypersons regarding CST was on the whole much lower than that of the priests. In no category of the table do laypersons score higher than 1.5 on the 4-point CST Knowledge Index. The significance of this finding becomes apparent when it is recalled that the laypersons selected for this study are the most active leaders in their

parishes, and thus are probably more knowledgeable and supportive of CST than the average Catholic. For example, 98% of the laypersons reported attending Mass at least weekly. The most recent General Social Survey found that only 31% of all Catholics attend Mass this often. Eight out of ten of the laypersons surveyed reported volunteering an average of 4 hours per week in their parish, a proportion that is surely much higher than average. Clearly, these parishioners represent the upper bound of devotion and activity in the Catholic Church. If they demonstrate low levels of CST knowledge and belief, we can infer that it must be extremely low among Catholic parishioners in general.

The second point is that for laypersons, but not for priests, increased knowledge of CST was associated with increased support in every case. Note that in Table 3 the direction of increasing knowledge for each item is the same as the direction of increasing support. In addition, there is a strong positive overall correlation (+.31) between the knowledge and support indices among the laypersons. Figure 7 illustrates the difference between priests and layperson on the relation between CST knowledge and support. As the figure shows, the extent of a priest's knowledge of CST has little effect on how strongly he believes or supports it. On the other hand, laypersons who know more about CST believe or support it more. If the goal is to encourage identification or support, and not just intellectual knowledge, of CST, then education efforts directed at laypersons will be more effective than those directed at priests.

Figure 7 About Here

The comparison of priests and laypersons also suggests something about the type of education that will be most effective for laypersons. This is readily seen if the effect of knowledge on support is partitioned to compare those with low and high levels of both. This

is done in Figure 8. Here it can be seen that among those who already have a good knowledge of CST, differences in knowledge have no effect on support. Among both priests and parishioners, those with "high" or "very high" knowledge of CST had identically strong support for it. Those who had "low" knowledge, however, had markedly increased support over those who had "very low" knowledge. The correlation of increased knowledge with increased support, among both priests and parishioners, is  $+0.32$  for those with low levels of CST knowledge, and  $0$  for those with high levels of CST knowledge. Since many priests have high knowledge, and many laypersons have low knowledge, this increase has a much stronger effect on laypersons. The kind of education about CST, then, that is likely to be most effective will be simple, basic, and general, geared toward those with little or no prior exposure to CST. Teaching laypersons a few of the basics of CST will likely have the strongest effect on increasing support among Catholics for this area of the Church's teaching.

Figure 8 About Here

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This study has explored the knowledge and acceptance of Catholic Social Teaching among priests and laypersons with a view to confirming or denying common perceptions about their attitudes among students of Catholicism. In general, perceptions about knowledge have been confirmed. As expected, we found that the level of CST knowledge among Catholic parishioners is extremely low, while among priests it is much higher. More active and educated parishioners, and younger priests, tend to have better knowledge of CST, as we would expect.

Acceptance or support CST, however, runs counter to the common perceptions at several points. We found that support among priests, while higher than among laypersons, depends most strongly on their age in a way that is opposed to knowledge. Older priests, with less explicit knowledge, are more supportive of CST than younger priests, who seem to know more about it. Laypersons, on the other hand, when they are equally as educated about CST as the priests, tend to support it just as much. Finally, for laypersons with little or no knowledge of CST, a small amount of education appears likely to produce a large increase in acceptance and support for this area of the Church's teaching.

In a larger sense, the findings of this study demonstrate the complex relationship between doctrine and personal belief. Doctrine evidently does not compel belief, nor can belief be deduced from doctrinal knowledge. Although the teaching of doctrine is essential, mere knowledge of doctrinal truth is not sufficient to bring about acceptance or belief in the truth being taught. Other factors, for pertinent instance age and religiosity, are also important determinants of belief.

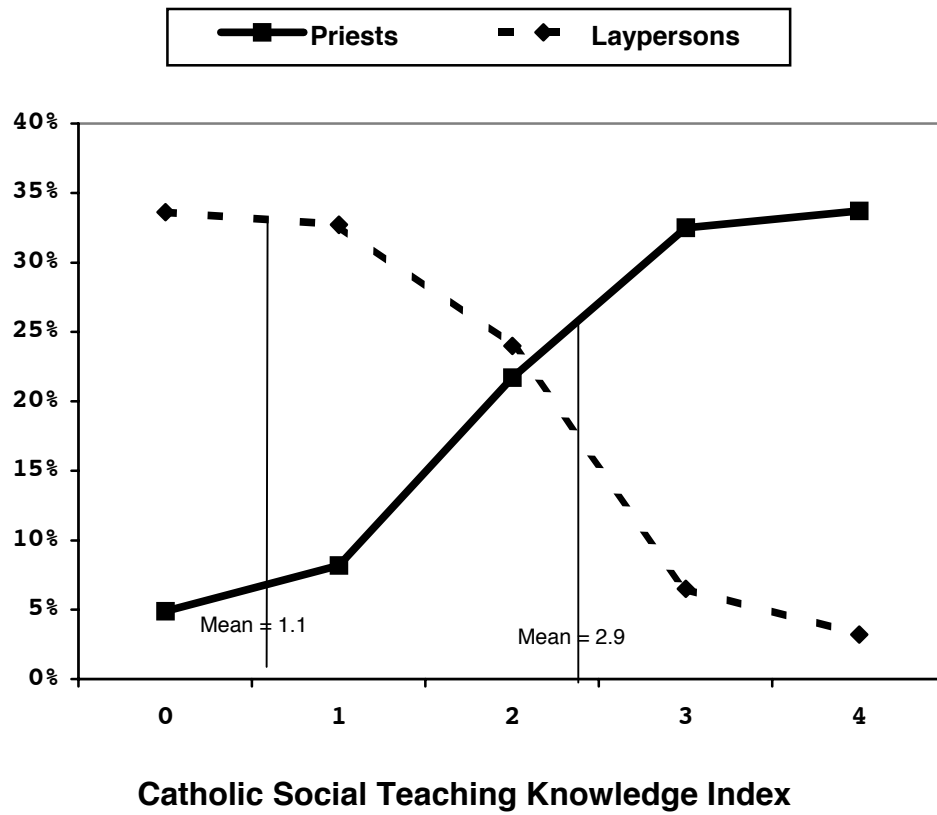
In this respect, American Catholics' acceptance of the Church's social teachings shows the same loose coupling of doctrinal knowledge and personal belief that is often noted in their acceptance of the Church's moral teachings. This, of course, may be due to a contemporary loss of intellectual rigor as compared to earlier eras in which belief among adherents of the faith was more widespread. However, granting for the moment the questionable proposition that doctrinal compliance was in fact more widespread in earlier eras, Catholic doctrine has never been able to present itself as necessary or compelling in a strict logical sense. Revealed truth must by its nature depend upon certain historical particularities, means of

communication, and social communities for its understanding; it cannot be apodictic. The loose coupling of knowledge and belief (and by extension, belief and action) among American Catholics, then, is probably related more to social factors than to psychological ones.

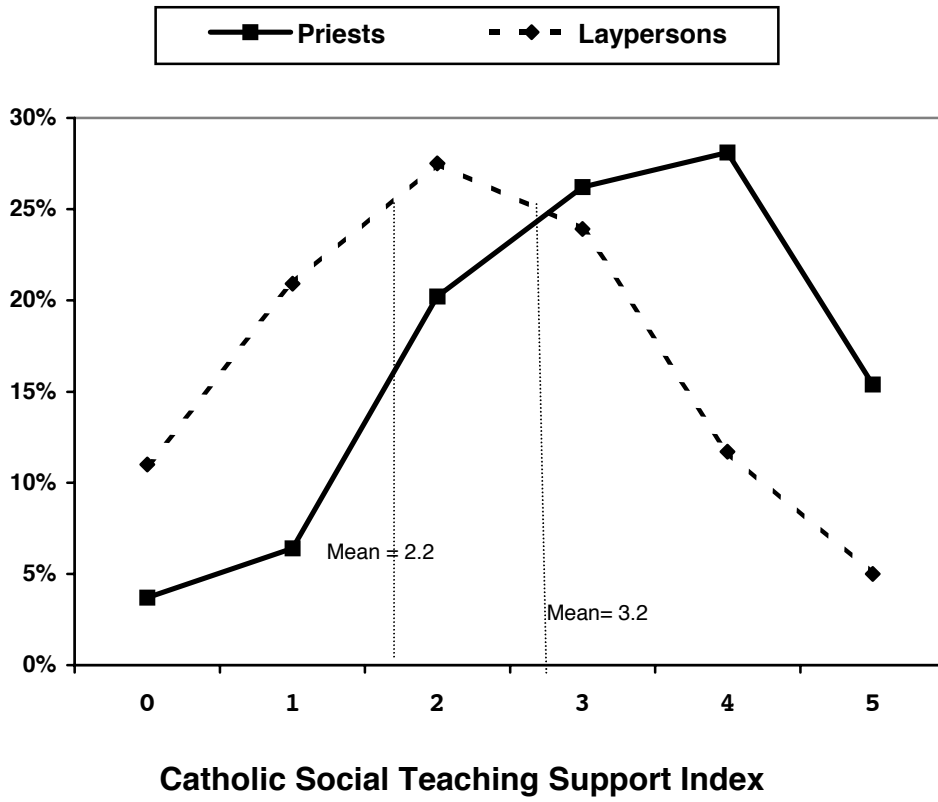
A more complete specification of those factors, and parsing of the question of knowledge and belief, would serve to extend, elaborate or rebut the very partial findings of this study. Moreover, an exploratory study such as this, devoted more to fact-finding than advancing a theory, can only offer conclusions in a tentative and general way. In this case, this tentativeness is heightened by the limitations in the data, particularly sampling error and fuzziness in the scales, discussed above. In contrast to studies that are long on theory and short on fact, however, the findings in this study about which are the most difficult to draw conclusions about may be the most valuable for the reader in the long run. In this way, by seeking new truth and attempting to understand it, the disparate findings of this study may be of use for advancing and correcting our understanding of what Catholics believe and accept.



**Figure 1**  
**Percent distribution of CST knowledge among**  
**Catholic priests and laypersons**



**Figure 2**  
**Percent distribution of CST support**  
**among Catholic priests and laypersons**



**Figure 3**  
**Catholic priests' Knowledge of and Support for**  
**CST by age**

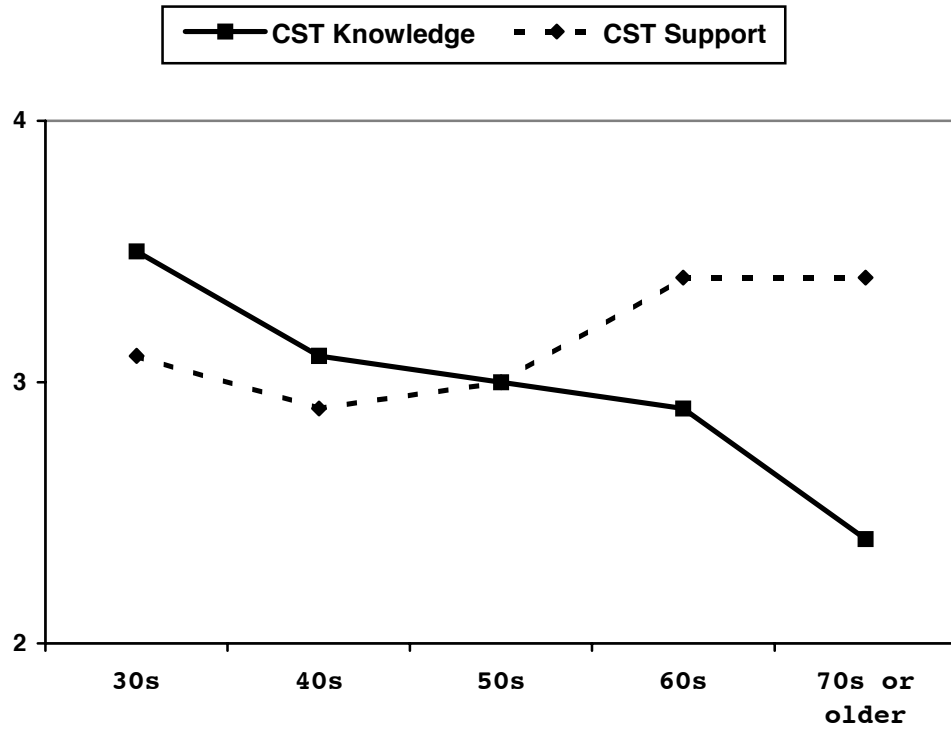


Figure 4

Percent of priests demonstrating knowledge of CST item, by age

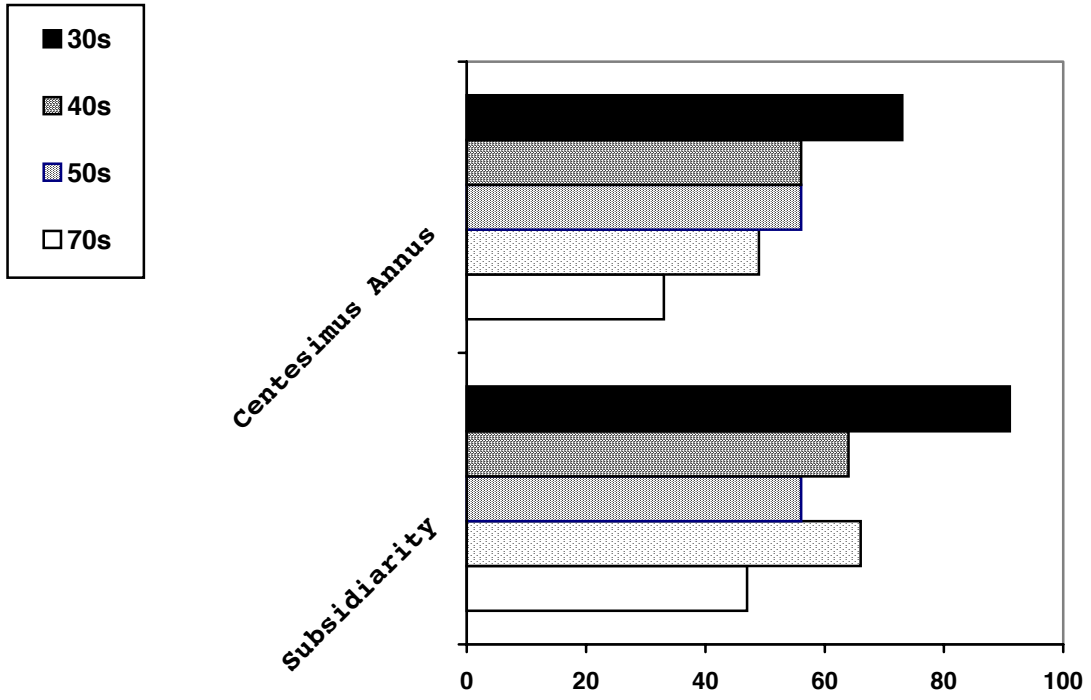
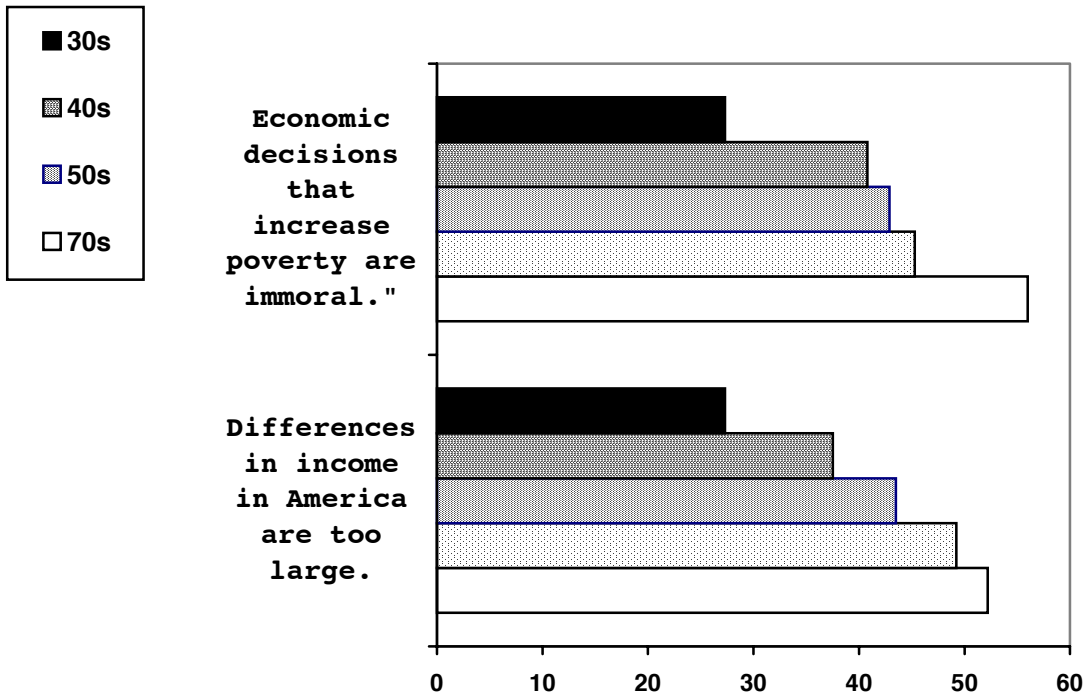
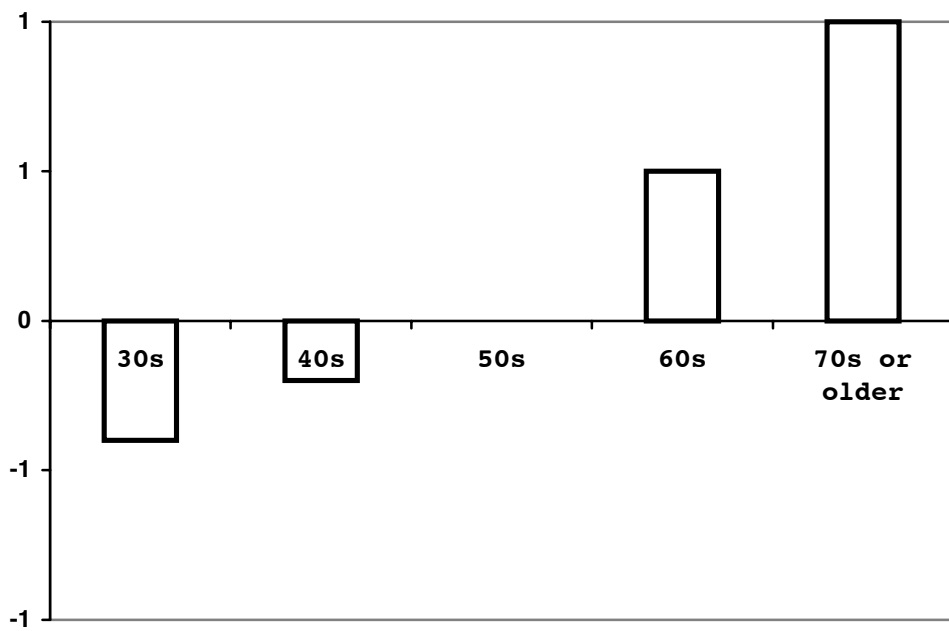


Figure 5

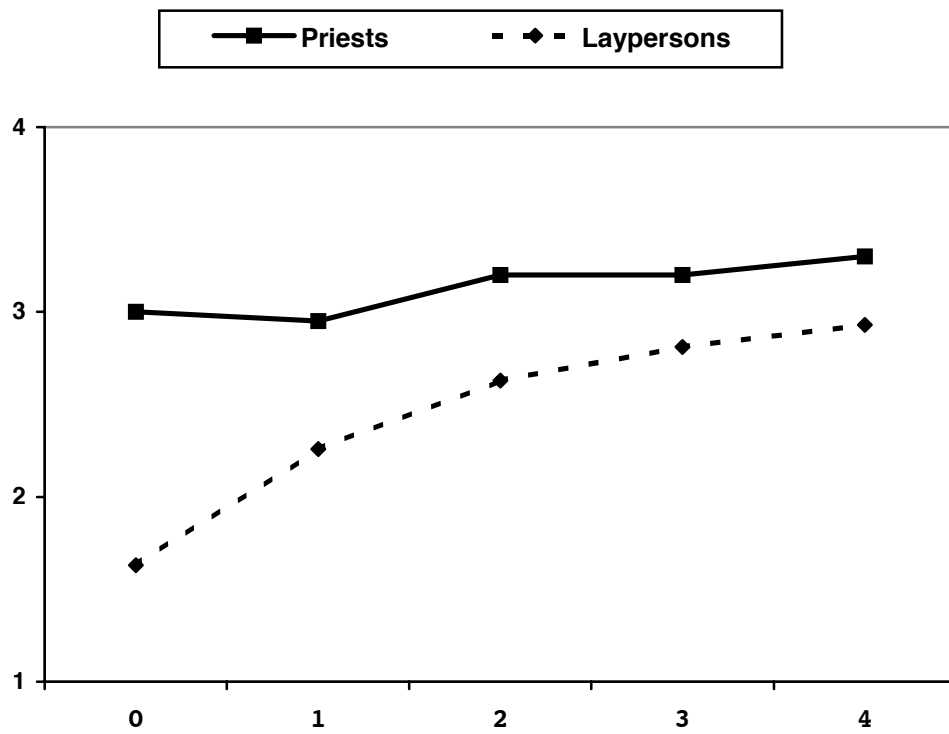
Percent of priests strongly agreeing, by age



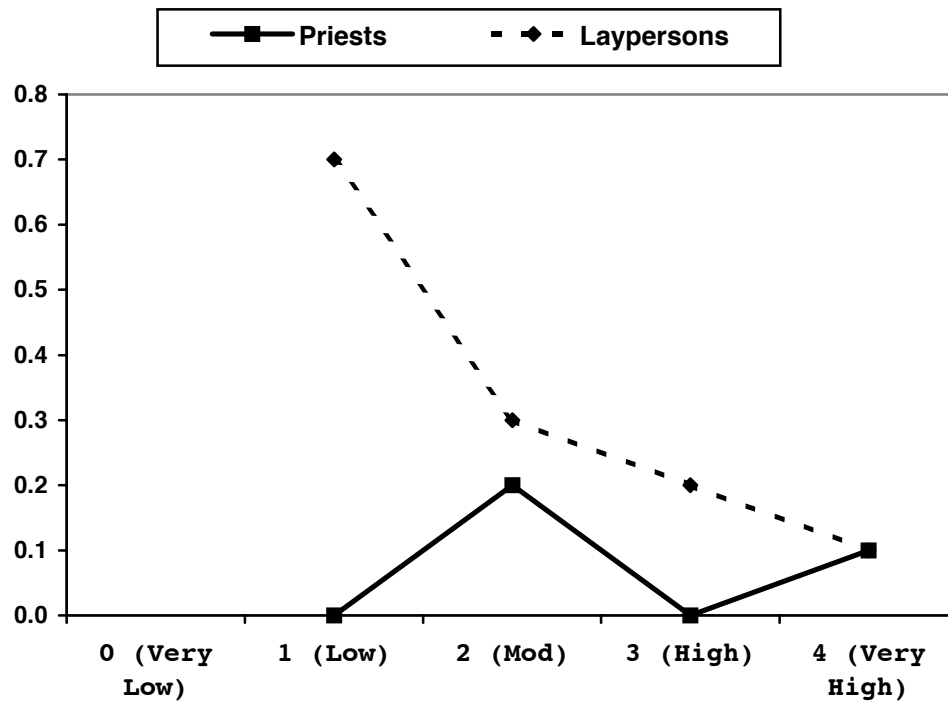
**Figure 6**  
**Excess of CST support over knowledge by age**  
**for Catholic priests**



**Figure 7**  
**Effect of CST knowledge on support, comparing**  
**Catholic priests and laypersons**



**Figure 8**  
**Increase in CST support with each increase in knowledge,**  
**comparing Catholic priests and laypersons**





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<sup>3</sup> *Official Catholic Directory*. 1899-2000. New York: P. J. Kenedy.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> USCC 1999, available from United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 3211 4<sup>th</sup> St NE, Washington, DC 20017

<sup>6</sup> Davidson, James D, Principal Investigator. Data from this 1995 national random sample of 1058 Catholics are archived by the American Religion Data Archive ([www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)). For more details, see Davidson, James D., Andrea S. Williams, Richard A. Lamanna, Jan Stenftenagel, Kathleen Maas Weigert, William J. Whalen, and Patricia Wittberg, S.C. 1997. *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor.

<sup>7</sup> National Opinion Research Center, 1972-1998. *General Social Survey* [machine-readable cumulative datafile} Smith, Tom W., Principal Investigator. Made available through the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>8</sup> *op cit.*

<sup>9</sup> The zero-order correlation of age with support is -.18 and of age with knowledge is -.14, both significant at .01. Since older priests, of course, tend to have been ordained longer; it is possible that this reflects a trend in ordination cohorts over time and not an effect of age. However, when age is controlled, priests' ordination year has no correlation with either knowledge or support; when ordination year is controlled, age has a significant (at .01) though weak positive correlation (+.11) with support and an equally strong negative correlation (-.11, significant at .01) with knowledge. These appear, then, to be effects of age and not of the year in which the priest was ordained.